



KEN PATTERN: DOCUMENTING JAKARTA'S DISAPPEARING LANDSCAPES

As a Canadian artist who has been endlessly inspired by Indonesia and Southeast Asia for the past two decades, Ken Pattern is meticulously documenting Indonesia's social heritage through his intricate, soulful images. For NOW! Jakarta's special "Canada in Indonesia" section, **Ayudita C. Ajani** interviewed the friendly artist who is also a proud Jakarta resident, in which he recollected his green activist past – where he painted the Greenpeace logo at its first office in Canada and his wandering journeys through countless *kampung* alleys – where he finds priceless inspirations for his signature drawings.

Creating visual images has always been a part of Ken Pattern's life. Being the typical school kid who brought home beautiful drawings all parents would be impressed by; Ken took art seriously throughout his school years. As Ken cleverly puts it, "For me, art was right up there with rock and roll and girls." After studying sociology at university and working as a graphic designer for a grass roots group that dealt with ecological concerns, Ken decided to continue his passion for art at the Emily Carr School of Art and Design, majoring in printmaking.

Fast forward to late 1988, and Ken Pattern and his wife moved to Jakarta after living in Beijing for three years. He soon began to draw (pen and ink) portraits of typical *kampung* street scenes of Jakarta. Over the years, his unique artistic images have gained many loyal followers and Ken has received critical acclaim for his significant contribution to Indonesia's social heritage. In 1997, Ken began to produce limited edition black and white lithographs of urban Jakarta scenes with which he continues to amaze people due to his poignant images and sharp eye for detail to this day.

Basically, what is your definition of art?

I have no definition for art. I don't even know what to call

myself: a documenter, a storyteller or an artist? The term is too broad, at least in English, to have any real meaning.

Most people acknowledge your pen and ink drawings and lithographs of Jakarta street scene as your trademark forte. What exactly makes you so fascinated with this form of art?

I come from a strong background in drawing, which is my passion and lithography is a natural medium for those who draw. Instead of drawing on paper, lithography requires drawing on limestone but drawing is drawing, regardless of the surface. I love the texture that the drawn image presents. Pen and ink is less forgiving than pencil or litho crayon, because once the ink is on the surface, it cannot be erased like pencil, though I can get more detail with the type of pen I use.

What's the most interesting thing about lithography that most people still don't know about?

Lithography is one of the four main print medias the others being: relief, carving into wood or linoleum; Intaglio, acid biting or engraving on metal plate; and Serigraph or silkscreen, as it is usually called, which is pushing ink through a stencil on a screen. Lithography is Plano graphic, which means that the image area and non-image area are on the same level or plane as opposed to intaglio and relief, which have two surfaces.

Not many people know of or understand lithography. Many think that a print is merely a copy of something and there is often confusion about the difference between a print and a reproduction. A lithograph print exists only as a print; it is not a copy of a work in another medium. Most people do not appreciate how much work goes into creating a lithograph from the graining and preparation of the stone, drawing the image, stabilizing the image on the surface of the stone and the printing by hand rolling ink onto the stone and cranking it through the press, where under pressure the ink is transferred from the stone onto the paper.

A reproduction is a copy of an original painting, drawing or other medium. The original work is photographed and reproduced using an offset or digital printing process. Sometimes fancy words are used such as "giclee print" (inkjet) but if an image is reproduced from another medium, it is still a reproduction. Numbering and signing the work does not guarantee that it is a true print. There is nothing wrong with reproductions but they should be marketed as such and priced accordingly.

How do you choose the subject matter for your lithographs? What are the basic criteria?

I have been dealing with Jakarta images in my lithographs for some years now and my aim is to show the traditional side of Jakarta life and to document the changes that have occurred in the time I have been here. There is usually a strong narrative in my work and I think of myself more as a storyteller who tells stories visually. For the most part the Jakarta scenes have little architectural value or historical importance but they do represent something rich and uniquely Jakarta. I see this work as documenting a social heritage. I have also tried to capture the diversity and beauty of the Indonesian landscape as I have experienced it in my travels throughout the country.

Apart from continuing your mission to document the many disappearing traditional urban landscapes, tell us the sole reason that has made you fall in love with this city? Is there any specific moment that triggered this?

I love the anarchy of this crazy city. Nothing is predictable and almost anything can, and probably will, happen. Like everyone, I hate the traffic, noise and pollution and the general lack of solving these problems but I love the buzz

of street life as Jakartans go about their daily routines, 24/7. Every single time I step into an alley anywhere in the city to wander through the endless labyrinth, I am genuinely inspired by those I meet as they work, play and pass the time.

Why do you use black and white drawings to depict Jakarta's unique urban scenes?

I see Jakarta as a black and white sort of place. I suppose it's the yin-yang of new and old, rich and poor, clean and dirty. It is a city of contrasts and what better way to depict its extremes than in black and white.

Tell us what are the typical Jakarta social scenes that usually interest you?

Walking through the narrow *kampung* alley and the traditional markets are REAL Jakarta experiences for me.

Is there a specific urban area in Jakarta that you really want to expose in your drawings? If so, why did you pick that specific area?

One area I keep coming back to is the back side of Jalan Sudirman with tall glass and steel towers as a backdrop to the *kampung* that manage to survive, and the contrast between these two very different worlds.

The people who live along the flood prone riverbanks of the *Kali Ciliwung* and *Kali Krukut* never cease to amaze me. Time and time again, with great ingenuity and resolve, they rebuild their flooded homes using found objects.

What is the most memorable experience you have come across in Jakarta during the making of your drawings?

It's difficult to think of one most memorable thing, because there are so many. One interesting experience took place in the Setia Budi area. In the mid 1990s, I made some ink drawings of the location just behind the Chase Bank building on Jalan Sudirman. The space was about to be developed when the economic crisis hit in 1997 and development came to a standstill. In 2003, I revisited the area to find that what had been an empty lot was full of banana trees. It was a virtual banana jungle in the shadow of busy Sudirman. The area had been liberated into this wonderful green belt. To commemorate the occasion, I produced a lithograph called "Setia Budi 2003". A few years later, it was once again prime



BY AYUDITA C. AJANI. PHOTOS: AGUNG NATANAEL & KEN PATTERN DOC.



The work exhibited was a crossover from Canada to Indonesia. I had typical Canadian landscapes and some early landscape impressions of Indonesia but nothing of Jakarta. The main focus for me was coming to grips with life in Indonesia. The tropical heat here really bothered me (still does) and when asked how I liked Indonesia I would say, "Fine, but I feel like an iceberg melting." This led to a series of oil paintings called "Icebergs in Paradise." The iceberg was a metaphor for me and the six paintings followed my departure from Canada to settling into Indonesia. Even though these surrealistic scenes were imaginary, my style is realistic and I was amused to hear that someone had overheard a couple ask each other where I possibly could have been to see an iceberg floating past a beach with palm trees.

You mentioned that your earliest influences were the work of Rene Magritte and M.C. Escher. What is it about them that you find very inspirational?

I have always liked the idea of using symbolism to explain reality. Both Magritte and Escher were masters of the absurd, the twisting of the "unreal" into the possible. I was, and still am, intrigued by their ability to look beyond what can be seen and to imagine another reality, a *surreality*. Much of my work before my time in Jakarta was surrealistic in style as are some of my recent paintings.

Where do you usually go travelling? What types of places fascinate you?

I have been travelling since I left my parents' home and in the 60s, I spent four years hitchhiking around the world (two years in Europe, a year in Africa and a year in Asia). Even to this day, my preferred mode of travel is to throw a pack on my back and head off to somewhere exotic. While living in Indonesia, I have been to several places such as Siem Reap, Northern Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, Australia, New Zealand, Timor Leste, and India.

Favourite destinations within Indonesia have included Sumba, Flores, Tana Toraja, and West Papua. I joked with someone once that I would have to come back several lifetimes to fit all of Indonesia in. There are many places I still wish to explore in this country.

I am most fascinated by traditional ways of life, rituals, customs, and architecture, especially as found in Sumba, Tanah Toraja, and with the Minangkabau.

Are you satisfied with your collection of work so far?

There are some works I've done which I think I could or should have done better and some that I destroyed or painted over for that reason. But all in all, I am satisfied with my accomplishments so far. I feel my most important work is yet to come. I'm not exactly sure what that may be but, I do think I learn something from everything I do and improve or expand my horizons as a result. I am happy where my life has taken me and would not change a single moment if I were to relive it.

What do you think of Indonesian people? What have you learned from them so far?

The first thing that comes to mind is the friendliness, patience, and tolerance Indonesians show. Just look at how drivers manoeuvre through Jakarta traffic. You rarely see any anger, and road rage is almost non-existent here. Whether browsing in a shop or walking through a *kampung*, I am always struck by how friendly and welcoming people are.

Please complete the sentence: Jakarta is chaos with a smile.

real estate and on that very same spot now stands the Peak apartment towers. I made a small lithograph to mark this. It completes a three-generation period of life in Setia Budi. But truly what stands out most on any of my *kampung* forays are the laughing, smiling, squealing collage of children having the time of their lives with nothing more to play with than their imagination and energy. Their joy is infectious.

When will you realise your plan to publish a book of these Jakarta drawings?

People often ask when I will do a book and eventually I plan to publish a record of my years of being inspired by Indonesia.

You have created almost 200 drawings of Jakarta's social heritage since the 1990s. How long will you continue to work on this long-time passion? Will you ever branch out into other fresh ideas and start a series of new drawings in the near future?

I started creating my Jakarta scenes in the early 1990s and went into overdrive in the mid 90s when the face of Jakarta was changing by the day. I keep returning to this theme but in between, I explore many other interests. I have recently been working on a series of pencil drawings of my experiences in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where nature and human made structures meet. Another long held theme is environmental, the ongoing conflict between we humans and all other species we co-habit this planet with, from plants to apes. The loss of habitat and misuse of our natural resources is a major concern for me. Over the past few years, I have been building a body of work through paintings, which deal with these matters. I also occasionally create Canadian landscapes.

You have definitely shown a high interest in environmental issues that impact our current condition in your paintings.

When did you first decide to head in this direction and why?

I joined a grassroots environmental group in Vancouver in the early 1970s as a graphic artist designing brochures and posters. The group I belonged to was called SPEC (the Society for Pollution and Environmental Control) and it was formed even before Greenpeace came along. In fact, the first office space Greenpeace ever had, anywhere in the world was in the SPEC office in Vancouver. I know this because I painted the Greenpeace logo (their design) on the office door. We were young and very idealistic and those early experiences still influence my work.

Can you tell us about your first art exhibition held in Jakarta back at Erasmus Huis in 1990? What was the theme and how was the public's response?

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