

NATURAL FIBRES AS AN EPHEMERAL ART FORM

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The project entitled '**Natural Fibres as an Ephemeral Art Form**' was prepared by **Adam Alexander Alammalay** and submitted to the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours (**Fine Arts**)

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ABSTRACT

This research is conducted to study about the potentials of natural fibres as an art form and as a subject of expressing art in a different point of view through a manipulation process. By using natural fibres and manipulating them through a certain process or method of execution, the fibres transforms into a new surface that is rich in textural properties and later can be moulded into other various art forms. There are two possibilities that lead to this research expansion. Firstly, it could lead to a new perception on how to view materials. Secondly, it can be perceived as another process oriented subject that can open up various possibilities as a component of sculpture that fitted in the contemporary art context. As a result, an installation of natural fibres has been exhibited to be shared with the audience.

ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji potensi bahan-bahan gentian semulajadi sebagai media untuk menghasilkan sebuah karya seni kontemporari, mengubah rupa bentuk dan gaya persembahan sesebuah karya melalui suatu proses manipulasi. Bahan-bahan gentian tersebut dimanipulasi dan diolah menjadi sesuatu permukaan baru yang mempunyai nilai jalinan dalam seni tampak. Terdapat dua kemungkinan dalam penghasilan kajian ini. Pertama, memberi persepsi dan pandangan yang berbeza terhadap kesan serta impak visual jalinan tersebut terhadap pemerhati. Kedua, ia boleh dilihat sebagai satu proses penghasilan bahantara baru yang menjadi komponen arca dalam konteks seni kontemporari. Lanjutan daripada kajian ini, bahan gentian semulajadi dipersembahkan dalam bentuk seni pemasangan untuk dikongsi bersama orang ramai.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Generally, natural fibres can be transformed into something strong and solid by mixing two or more fibres from different origin and characteristics. By adding chemicals or through a certain process of production being applied to the fibres, the lifespan of the fibres is preserved and made resistant thus making it strong, durable and long lasting for multiple purpose and function. For example, paper is made from tree pulp and by adding additional chemicals and bleaching properties. This can enhance and make the paper as what we see today, thin and available in many colours thus is writeable on its surface.

Paper is being produced by humans since the earliest time of civilization. This is proven where the first paper was made by the Egyptians using reeds known as Papyrus which is obtained from the fertile rivers of Nile. These long reeds are flattened and beaten up to spread the pulp and form paper. Another reference that is used to make this research process possible is taken from "Papermaking in Bhutan" by Mirka Knaster. In this model of making paper, some of the appropriate methods and process are followed while others are omitted due to irrelevance and it's difficult to conduct.

According to Miriam Webster online dictionary the first meaning of the word bond means "something that binds or restrain". To bind two natural fibres through a boiling process is what is intended to be achieved in this research to see the converging effects and textural properties.

The term mixed media is generally "a technique involving the use of two or more artistic media that are combined in a single composition", (Farlex, 2010).

In this research, two natural fibers are used to make a mixed media composition thus with added light-emitting diode (LED) to enhance the media is also part of the outcome display.

According to Miriam Webster online dictionary, the word installation means “a work of art that usually consists of multiple components often in mixed media and that is exhibited in a usually large space in an arrangement specified by the artist”.

“For Centuries bark cloth has been made in South America, Africa and Polynesia from the bark of trees belonging to the mulberry family. It is possible to produce a very fine fabric but today it is mostly used for producing bark cloth paintings which are sold to tourists”, (Beith. M, et.al, 1997 p.18).

‘Tapa’ or ‘barkcloth’ is made from the inner bark from a mulberry tree family and it is one of the most distinctive outputs of some Pacific region culture. It dates back from the early nineteenth century where it is used for incorporating many functional items such as attire and furniture. Now days it is merely a decorative ornament used to generate income, (Neich. R and Pendergrast. M, 1997).

Basically, this fibre is strong and it is a useful fabric. In the early days, tribes from rural areas use the bark cloth to make clothes, attires and furniture covers thus wall panels and blankets even carpets. This material is naturally useful and it use to be the early textiles before woven fibres like cotton came into production.

The banana tree fibre is another type of fibre used for many reasons because of its water resistant properties. It has a glossy surface and its inner pulp can be eaten besides its fruit. Now days, humans are sorting out alternatives for paper production to minimize the cutting down of forest trees. By using the banana tree pulp, paper too can be produced and be manipulated into many other types of items and form. This fibre is lately being used by Sulaiman Ramli a local entrepreneur in the paper production industry.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this project is to combine both the bark cloth fibre and the banana tree pulp through a boiling process to form up a mixture which can be manipulated into any art form. This mixture in extension will be used to create natural forms that will be rich in textures.

This research is conducted to study about the features and characteristics of the two fibres chosen which are the bark cloth fibre or ‘Artocarpus Elasticus’ and the banana tree pulp.

This research is to accomplish a production of a series of rich surface texture to look appealing, interesting, a very delicate, and fragile thus ironically will not last for a long time. (Ephemeral) This experimentation remains in a documented form which is photography.

3.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Instead of creating a surface by using the existing textures which the eye normally see and obtain from observation, why not generate an organic texture surface deriving from the converging effects of two natural fibres which is the bark cloth fibre and the banana tree pulp. From this converging effect, the audience can expect to see a unique textural formation being generated from the whole experimentation process. A new textural quality or surface can be perceived by the audience which is being generated by the ephemeral fibres.

3.1 Hypothesis

“A hypothesis brings clarity, specify and focus to a research problem”, suggests Ranjit Kumar (2005), p. 73. In this research, there are three hypotheses that arise which are as follows:-

1. The bark cloth and banana tree fibre can be combined together through the boiling process to create natural textural effects.
2. The two natural fibres combination can produce a strong and solid surface thus is able to last for a certain period of time without disintegrating immediately.
3. The two natural fibres mixture created can be placed on any surface during the casting period because of its liquidity and flexibility feature.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, the qualitative method of obtaining data and information regarding about the project is chosen. In this method where its method of

obtaining data is open-ended, it allows room to gain more information pertaining to the research. Next, the experimental process is to test my fibres and through this method, it can come up with a certain mixture to create a surface rich in textures. The boiling process is chosen as an experimentation process involved in manipulating the two natural fibres. In addition, the camera is used to document the whole process and to provide evidence of the whole experimentation process.

4.1.0 Secondary Data

Referring to written materials such as books and journals, it helps to make the research informative and reliable. A book written by Heidi Munan ‘Sarawak Crafts, 1994 by Oxford University Press Publications’ to assists regarding about the bark cloth and how it is used among the Sarawak ethnic tribes.

4.1.1 Experimentation

The experimentation approach is chosen because it is “a systematic investigation of some phenomenon or series of phenomena by the experimental method”, (The International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of The English Language, 1996, p 1071).

4.1.2 Observational Research

This method is applied in this research because “it is systematic process of viewing and recording a phenomenon without questioning, communication with, or interacting with the group being studied”, (O’Grady. K. V, 2006, p.36).

Through the experimentation process, all steps are being observed and written down. Then they are suited according to relevance and accurateness then the recipe for this combination mixture is gained based on trial and error method. Every time a substance is added into the mixture, it is recorded in quantity to ensure the mixture turns up as desired; even and balanced.

4.1.3 Photography

Making full use of photography as a documentation tool in this research is very important. It helps to document the whole process and procedure involved in my research in images format. All the process involved in this research is recorded and kept in an image form. The collected images are then used as evidence of conducting my research. (See attachments: 1 to 7 pg. 22-28)

4.2 Research Materials

For this research, utensils and cooking ware is needed such as a container or pot. A stove which is optional (gas or electric) is needed as well for fire source. A heavy duty rubber gloves is also a must to protect hands from chemicals and hot water handling. A ladle or stick is used to stir up the mixtures. A basin in multiple sizes is used to strain and separate the fibres and for other purpose. Bleaching chemicals are needed for removing the fibres colours and stains. Next, a silk screen mesh or (Mould and deckle) to place mixture for casting and forming up into other shapes and forms. Caustic soda is needed to remove acid properties from the fibres. Colanders or strainers are used to sieve the fibres after boiling

and to discard unwanted water and excess liquids. The disposable plastic bags are used to prevent leakage and mixture from falling out from the mould. It is also used to coat the mould making the mixture easily removable or separated later when dried. Scissors or any other cutting tools are needed to cut up the fibres. Plywood boards are used to flatten the mixture to make a flat surface. A blender is used to crush and smash the fibres into tiny bits and pieces. Also not forgetting, the two main fibres such as the bark cloth fibre and the banana tree pulp fibre and also the bonding medium which is the Polyvinyl Acetate (PVA) glue and corn flour to make the mixture thick and easily joinable.

5.0 INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

“As more and more researchers journeyed into the cultural territory, we are constantly being introduced of new definitions, phrases or keywords in which sometimes have contradicting meanings or ideas”, (Khor, 2002). Literature review is important in order to acquaint one with the body of knowledge regarding about ones area of interest. It is a crucial part of research where it supports the whole step in conducting a research. (Kumar, R, 2003). This research refers to a few selected artist and terms to help enhance the research in executing the outcome and help rectify problems occurring in the future. Both local artist such as Wong Hoy Cheong, Ramsay Ong etc and foreign artist such as Nichole Dextras, Marie-Jeanne Lorenté, etc are chosen to assist in research content and also book writers such as Heidi Munan helps to gain insights on the mediums being used for this research.

Wong Hoy Cheong is a Malaysian artist who uses natural fibres as a metaphoric tool to make a comparison of indigenous and the non indigenous culture in the society. By using plants such as soya beans, chillies, papaya, tapioca, tea, tobacco, tomato, chiku, and corn to represents the non indigenous, while the star fruit, water apple, banana, mango, coconut, torch ginger, piper leaves and arecahe is representing the indigenous plants, or plants which grows naturally from Malaysia. These suggest identity and authenticity. These fibres are transformed into head bust which are obtained anonymously from university students heads. In extension of the 'Kulit' exhibition where this artwork was being displayed, Poison was the expansion of this work where he still uses natural fibres to create moulded heads from university students of various ethnic background which are being formed later up to highlight on the issue of racism with the state propaganda, ethnicity and the domestication of poison.

The element that I observe in his artwork is the textural quality protruded by the bust using lights. Being different from my artwork, I use the Bark cloth which is indigenous to the most ethnics in Sarawak which is especially to the Kenyah, Kayan, Iban and Orang Ulu tribes whom uses this exotic fibre to make multiple functional items such as vest known as 'Kelambi', wall partitions, attire and suits for ceremonial occasions, blankets, etc. This is a very useful fibre to most of the natives in Sarawak and I see the possibilities of this fibre to be better if it is merged with the banana tree pulp, which on the other hand is used by or indigenous to the Indian society where this tree is functional as well as the bark cloth. The leaves of the banana tree can be used as natural plates to serve food or

for religious practices, the fruit can be eaten and the potassium contained on the banana skin can be used to make leaves shine and become glossy, while the inner pulp of the banana tree can be cooked up to make food or to be used to make paper. One local entrepreneur who accomplished this is Sulaiman Ramli from Penang who makes paper from banana tree pulp.

Ramsay Ong is another local artist who explores the bark cloth fibre by applying acrylic or oil paint on the medium. He replaces the conventional canvas cloth being used commonly by other artist to make his artworks. He deals with collage, papier-mâché, abstract painting, decorative arts and crafts, and batik printings. His work is considered to be different from the other artist in terms of an attempt of drawing on the 'exotic' fibre known as bark cloth.

His paintings are normally reliefs and it is not two dimensional. His work is different from mine where I do not use the medium to draw on, but I break up the medium and combine the medium with the banana tree pulp to make something new. This can be transformed into anything and it opens up a room full of possibilities.

Nichole Dextras is an artist from Canada which study's ephemeral art. She deals with the disintegrating beauty of nature and she captures it in photographs. In her artwork, she made a huge ice cube with a shirt placed in it and later she allowed it to melt slowly. This implies the decaying and ephemeral event of all living beings on this planet and it is to prompt a non lasting factor in this life

in terms of beauty and youth. That is why she chooses ice which is a cold and solid form but will not remain as such for long as a visual character to illustrate the descending of youth and beauty in accordance with time. This artist is selected as a reference because this artist studies about the simple formation and natural process of substances and relates it as an ephemeral factor and transforms her idea into an art form. She use water in its solid form which is ice to execute her artwork despite of the medium being used is being ephemeral.

Hiltrud Schäfer is a German artist who uses bark cloth specifically belonging to the Japanese Mulberry tree (Kozo) or Sedge to make an artwork. Her artwork is three dimensional and she uses the organic element of plants as a symbol to suggest life and death, in other words ephemeral. Nothing is everlasting in this world and this is what the artist strongly believes and this is being reflected in her 'Paar' (1992) and 'Haute' (2000) artworks. "In her works, Hiltrud Schafer addresses the tension that reigns between birth and life, the ephemeral and death. The element of time becomes metaphorically attainable", (Marie-Jeanne Lorenté, 2002, p.172). This artist uses the bark cloth individually and she never combines it with other fibres. This is what differentiates my artwork from hers.

However, **Marie-Clarie Meier** suggests that, "By transforming plant into paper, I find the language of fibres which seem to be a universal language-the ideal instrument for communicating", (Meier, 2004, p. 162). Most artists who uses plant to make paper tends to make their artwork poetic as it relates to the reason the medium is being used to write on. In my case, to protrude the medium as a

metaphor which is closely related to preservation, it is suitable to use a metaphor because natural fibres are closely related to the ephemeral arts and it can be expressed as an art form.

Pascale Pasello, is an ephemeral artist from France, who learned from Marie-Jeanne Lorenté the art of making paper from plants. “She calls her projects plant moltings”. She makes sculptures from leaves such as chestnut, elm or oak, and later she cooks it and transforms them into paper. The technique which this artist use which is cooking is adapted into my artwork method and I do not use such leaves in my artwork instead I use the bark cloth fibre and the banana tree fibre to make the mixture and form.

Heidi Munan, a New Zealander writer who writes and study about the Sarawak lifestyle and culture because of her keen passion and fascination towards it. She even writes about the local folk lore’s titled ‘How Dalat got its name’ which is being used as literature material in secondary school now days. Her writings about the bark cloth being used in Sarawak as a versatile tool is seen where the rural ethnics utilize it as attire, furniture application and as a decorative medium.

7.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on this simple experimentation process, the following results are obtained. The mixture needs the PVA glue, Caustic soda and the Starch in order to become as being pictured below. The PVA glue helps join the fibres together

and when it hardens up, the fibres stick well together and the glue also creates a glossy effect on the surface making it resistant to dust and fungus formation. The caustic soda helps make the fibre colour look more natural and it removes all acid properties in the fibre.



Figure 1

The bark cloth and banana tree pulp outcome. This combination is added with natural strings and threads from the straw fibres for textural effect enhancement and to make the fibre bond strong.



Figure 2

This outcome purely reflects on the two natural fibres formation. The surface is even and equal. To accomplish this surface, the drying process needs to be natural and not being dried immediately using the oven.



Figure 3

This combination is added with glittering sequences for decorative purpose and to create additional textural effects.



Figure 4

This combination is added with cotton strings to make the bond of the mixture stronger and appliqué. The usage of natural cotton is placed to create additional lines quality and to enhance the physical appearance of the surface.

The form which is being used or emphasised in this project is the hemispherical form. Besides that, there is also the rectangle shaped being selected because it is being casted in a silk screen platform which is basically rectangle in shape.

The two fibres being used in this research is considered to be functional and indigenous to some ethnic or race. This gives a high influence to the form of the artwork. The rationale of selecting a hump shape or an almost hemispherical form is selected because it is considered challenging to mould.

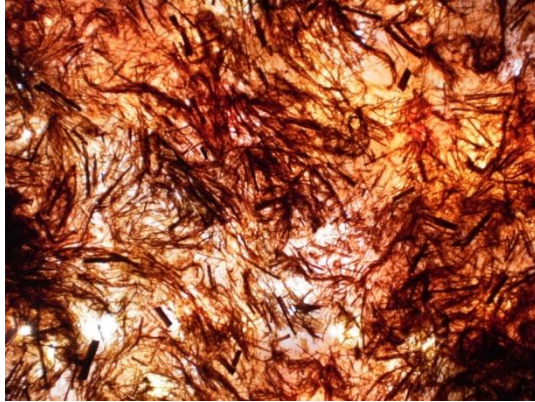


Figure 5

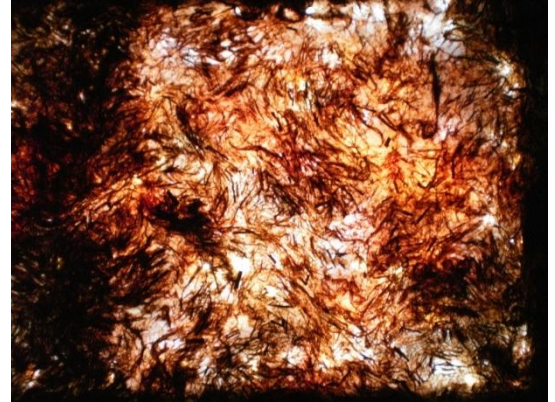


Figure 6

The bark cloth and banana tree pulp outcome with light-emitting diode (LED) placed below the surface. The surface is generally flat. The surface when added additional lights gained from LED, it highlights the textural properties on the surface. It is then confined to the rectangle frame.

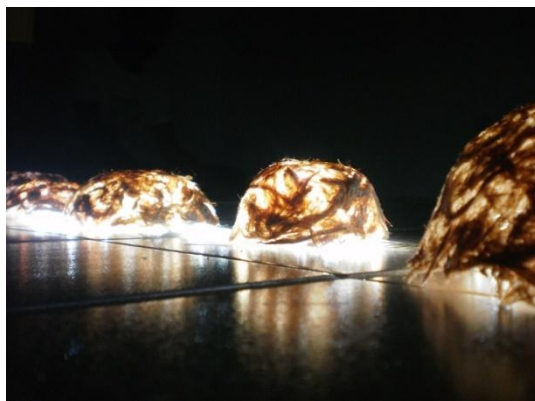


Figure 7

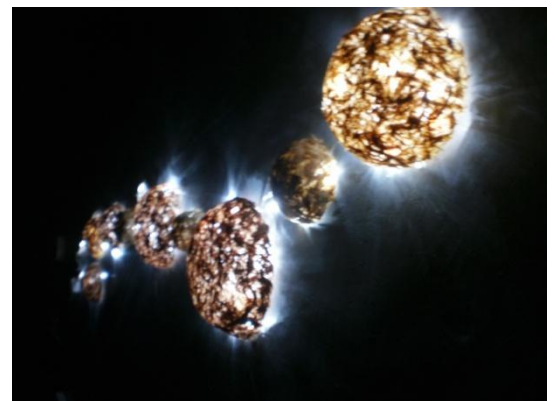


Figure 8

The bark cloth and banana tree pulp outcome with light-emitting diode (LED) placed below the surface. Arranging the art forms based on the gestalt theory of human perception makes the artwork meaningful and aligned in a proper manner. The Gestalt theory of human perceptions (continuance). Here fewer hump forms are added to see effectiveness of protruding the textural qualities.