

AiRCAST#2

RUSSELL MORTON

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Russell Morton, Residencies OPEN, 18 September 2021. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Anna Lovecchio: Welcome to AiRCAST. AiRCAST takes us inside the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, located right at the edge of a lush tropical forest in Gillman Barracks. On this podcast, we broadcast the inner lives of our Artists-in-Residence entering their studios during their residency and inviting them to share about ideas, materials, processes, influences and research methodologies behind their practice. I'm Anna Lovecchio. I'm a curator and assistant director for programmes at NTU CCA Singapore and I am your host for today.

In this episode, we're going to venture into the mysterious and mobile mindscape of our Artist-in-Residence, Russell Morton who is deeply immersed in his most ambitious project to date: his first feature film. We will find out where the vision for the film comes from and what it takes to pull off such an endeavour. But before we start, a few words to introduce him. Russell Morton is a Singaporean artist and filmmaker whose work often features Southeast Asian folkloric figures and esoteric rituals, enmeshing mythological narratives and existentialist concerns. His short films have minimum narrative developments and rather than being centred on the plot, they are driven by the spellbinding physicality of the characters, the engrossing lavishness of the visuals, and the evocative power of the soundtrack. Beyond his individual practice, Russell is also a household name in the local independent film scene having borrowed his arresting cinematography to many other Singaporean artists of his generation, such as Yeo Siew Hua, Kent Chan, and Ang Song-Ming.

Anna Lovecchio: Hey Russell, thank you for being here. How are you today?

Russell Morton: Hello. Very good. Very happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Anna Lovecchio: So let's kick off by talking about your background. Being an artist is one of the most difficult jobs, in my opinion. There are countless variables involved in this career choice which are largely beyond anyone's control. So I'm always curious to find out how artists become artists, if that happens because of an early vocation or through formal education, or by dint of some pivotal encounter. What is your story?

Russell Morton: Yes, my story... Thank you. Thank you for that question. I started out in film school. I went to LaSalle College of the Arts where I learned the formal qualities of filmmaking, structure, lighting... But in my third year, I had an encounter with a Singaporean video artist, Ho Tzu Nyen. He was doing a course in my school about experimental filmmaking. And this was really my first introduction to video art, to this new way of telling stories. I was very moved by this. I thought it was, for lack of a better word, a "punk" way of making films. So yeah, this sparked curiosity in me in a new way. When I graduated from the LaSalle I went to work with him and we worked on a few projects together. I was the editor for a project called *Pythagoras*. I was in the art department for his Venice Biennale piece, *The Cloud of Unknowing* [2011]. We worked together on many projects after that and, during this time, I came to know quite intimately the process of art making. At least, the real execution of the craft itself. It's something I suppose I also do in my films. Something I apply to my films. In my films, you know, I'm the cinematographer and I'm the editor, I'm the writer, I'm the director. I have this skill sets which I've learned while working with him. So when I went to do my postgraduate degree in London, I made my first art film there. And after I made it, I couldn't help but seeing references, or at least an inspiration that was very closely connected to working with Tzu Nyen. I saw a lot of these connections. At a point of time it bothered me that I was seeing these close references and I reached out to him about it. I have his email reply that I'd like to share with you. I wrote to him and he replied with this email. This is an excerpt, he said: "About similarities and repetitions, I have undergone my fair share of questions and thinking about that. My conclusion is that one should not bother about it at all. The most important thing is to make works that you feel happy about. First of all, every work is like a bridge to another work. It's like a continuous passage. So the work itself is not the object, just the means to go somewhere. Secondly, every work comes from somewhere else, from another work perhaps. This is the silent dialogue of all artworks. A poet becomes a poet only after he has read a poem that has moved him before."

Anna Lovecchio: That's really beautiful. And that became the title of your work, right?

Russell Morton: Yes, I was really moved by this. It encouraged me to continue making works to celebrate the references in my work not to hide behind it. I named the video that I made after a line in the email, *The Silent Dialogue of All Artworks*. Fast forward 12 years and here I am.

Anna Lovecchio: Oh, that's such a nice story. It's always interesting to hear about the influences that artists exert on each other and how this creates new works. What you described, I think, it's a very common anxiety felt by young authors and artists. There is this famous book by Harold Bloom, that I think Tzu Nyen is probably implicitly referencing in his answer. It's called *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973]. There he addresses this psychological struggle felt by young authors and the position of Bloom is to say that influence is, simply, inescapable. And that there's no original poem. He is talking about literary theories, mostly. And it's something that, you know, it's a very organic process and there's no original artwork that comes with no connections with what came before the work itself. So yeah, it's great that you're now more comfortable with this, acknowledging what's feeding you, nurturing your imagination.

Russell Morton: Yeah. And it really reinvigorated this confidence of where I get my ideas from, and not shy away from it.

Anna Lovecchio: I think that we're going to talk a lot about influences in the rest of the conversation because this new work you're creating is clearly being influenced by many events, either personal or historical. During the residency, we had the privilege of seeing you at work on your first feature film. For us it has been incredibly exciting to see the clusters of research materials slowly take over the space of the studio. Can you share where you're at right now and what is the timeline of this project?

Russell Morton: I'm still very early on in the project, I'm still developing the script. This will be my first feature film. Until now, I've made only shorts. I'm right now writing the first draft [of the script] and I am doing some film labs. And I'm doing one with the Film Development Council of the Philippines. Then, later on in November, I'll do one lab with the Berlinale Talents Tokyo. I'm really

taking the time to do the research, which is how I spent my CCA residency really developing a script, getting feedback, getting criticised. And really honing the plot and narrative of the film. So this year, I will concentrate on this. Next year I will continue this process and at the same time find the financing strategy of the project. Then, hopefully in 2023, although my producer thinks is more likely 2024, we start principal photography. So, yeah, one thing I'm also starting to feel is the stamina that is needed for executing a project like this, you know. it's such a long process and just to keep yourself occupied and have this drive to keep on following this vision, now it's sounding like three, four years in the making.

Anna Lovecchio: You need a lot of us strong will and focus and, yeah, it's a very long timeline. If we can zoom in a bit more on the research you've been doing so far, one major inspiration of this film is a gruesome event that happened in 1963, just two years before Singapore's independence. On the small island of Pulau Senang, a few miles south from mainland Singapore, something went awfully wrong. And the early 60s were, indeed, a turbulent time in this part of the world. The winds of decolonization were sweeping the region and the arduous process of building national identities had been set in motion. In Singapore, the people's Action Party, which has been ruling the country until today, had won its first election in 1959, and it was quenching with an iron fist the voices of the opposition, arresting left-wing political leaders and unionists. Across the sea in January 1963, Sukarno declared Konfrontasi to oppose the nascent Federation of Malaysia opening up a period of violent tensions in the region. But against such a thick backdrop of political turmoil and social unrest, the historical episode you singled out is an event that is instead, quite literally, insular. What happened in Pulau Senang?

Russell Morton: Before I begin, I have a clip here that I'd like to play and share with you. It's a clip from the National Archives that I found, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture for Singapore. Let me play this clip for you here.

Anna Lovecchio: Thank you.

[Audio excerpt from *Island of Hope*, National Archives Website, Record date 1960s, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/audiovisual_records/record-details/46b4445e-1164-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad]



Russell Morton's studio, Residencies OPEN, 18 September 2021. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Russell Morton: So this is a clip from a film called *Island of Hope*. It is publicly available in the National Archives website. It's a video that positions the event of Pulau Senang as a form of utopian dream.

So what happened in 1960 [is that] they initiated an idea for a penal Island. When the prisoners arrived there, the island was barren. It was just a jungle. And the prisoners were made to build the whole place up with their own hands. This was also an idea for reform and rehabilitation: that through hard work and labour, reform could happen. It was experimental, in a way, because there were no walls. There were no watchtowers. The prison guards there weren't armed, although they were advised to be armed but the commanding officer at the time didn't want to have this sort of image. So after a while, this this place became a proper civilization. There was running water, there was electricity, there were roads, there were buildings. And then three years after this experiment took place, a riot broke out. Within they say like 40 minutes, they tore down and destroyed everything that they've built within three years. Three officers died in this process, one of them, the commanding officer, Daniel Dutton, quite brutally so. He was found with only his feet because they were covered in his boots and the rest of his body was burnt. Very gruesome, dark, social unrest. Later on, everybody was arrested.

Later, 59 [of the prisoners] were charged with rioting, while 18 were charged with murder, and then sentenced to the death penalty. I believe it's the largest death sentence set in Singapore since then.

Anna Lovecchio: What specific aspects of this event resonate most with you? And how do you plan to weave them into the fabric of the film?

Russell Morton: This film, as it stands now, is not a documentary of the event. I'm inspired by this event. I will take some themes from this event into my film. Specifically the theme of guilt and trauma. The idea of crime and punishment. Punishment as a sort of rite of passage to overcome guilt. I'm thinking of the mental prison that comes with guilt, the psychological mental prison, also the metaphorical prison, and also the actual physical prison itself.

Anna Lovecchio: That's very fascinating... Whether personal circumstances matter or not in the appreciation of an artwork, is very much open to question. Some people argue that artworks are autonomous entities that fly high and above the specific conditions of their creation, while other people maintain that context and biographical underpinnings are crucial to the full understanding of a work of art. I'm not exactly sure where you stand here, especially with regards to this project, which is very much tied to personal circumstances of your own life. And here I'm thinking of the fact that you grew up next to Changi Prison, watching prisoners going about their lives.

Russell Morton: Yeah, so my father was a prison warden. I had the privilege actually to live in the prison quarters, within the prison compounds. I would see the Changi Prison walls as I walked in and out to school or whatnot, and so that environment was a very big part of my childhood growing up. I think my relationship with prisoners would differ from people who didn't have this experience. I would see prisoners every day. They would be the groundskeepers of the quarters. They'd be the gardeners, the painters, the cleaners. I saw them in this very, I think, human level. And this relationship wasn't distant from me at all. So I really think I tapped into my personal history for this project. Fellini would say "All art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster's autobiography".

Anna Lovecchio: Okay, so now I know where you stand! Also, the Pulau Senang events, did you find out about them from your dad? It seems that this story is not really well known in Singapore today.

Russell Morton: Yes, one of the surprising things I discovered during the open studios at NTU CCA. A lot of Singaporeans came to the studio and did not have any recollection or idea that these riots actually happened or that this island even exists. But for me, it was a story that my dad told me, one of the many stories that he told me growing up, and I thought it was a big social unrest story in Singapore's history. We know about the Maria Hertogh riots, the racial riots, and I thought this was one of those riot stories that Singaporeans would know. There is no intentional "covering up", you know, the story is very publicly available. There have been theatre plays about this. There's also a CNA documentary on this island. But it's just not on the radar of Singaporeans. It's just something I knew. And I thought everyone else knew as well.

Anna Lovecchio: And maybe in a few years, when the film is out...

Russell Morton: It will become popular culture.



Russell Morton's Artist Talk, Residencies OPEN, 18 September 2021. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Anna Lovecchio: Yes, exactly. This idea for the film predates the outbreak of the pandemic. And it seems to me that you are envisioning this story as a kind of universal metaphor for a certain existential condition of lingering in a state of entrapment, as you said, between crime and punishment, dealing with one's own ghosts. But I was also thinking that the story of a character who finds himself stranded in the middle of the sea with nowhere to go, will probably gain a wider emotional resonance now that all of us have experienced first-hand— because of the pandemic—a state of captivity and the impossibility to go anywhere. So what I'm trying to say, I guess, is that the story you're capturing in your film is, to some extent, no longer a figment of your imagination but it has become a collective real-life experience that many people will be able to relate to subjectively. Have you thought about this? That the pandemic might trigger a deeper connection between the spectator and the story of the film and add new emotional layers to the perception of the work?

Russell Morton: Yeah, that's a very good observation because it's something I didn't realise when I was making this film. Like you said, it's an idea that I had that predates this whole lockdown episode that we're having now. It reminds me of when Robert Eggers released *The Lighthouse* [2019], which is a reference for me. He also released it just before the pandemic lockdown. And he also had this idea of being trapped on this island. And a lot of people resonated with it, it came out at the right time. Maybe when this film is finally released in 2024, or 2025, a new conversation will happen. Maybe all of us will be living on kelongs because sea levels have risen. And this film would resonate on this new big human event.

Anna Lovecchio: Yeah, my guess is that everybody's going to say: "Russell did this film during the pandemic, he was inspired by the pandemic". Now, we are recording a historical statement that no, the idea came before. It all started before the pandemic.

[Recording from Russell Morton's site visit to a kelong in Singapore. Courtesy the artist.]

Russell Morton: You heard it here first!

Anna Lovecchio: It's great that you mentioned the kelong because that was going to be my next prompt for you. For this project, you are looking very closely at kelong, a type of vernacular architecture that used to be rather ubiquitous

across Southeast Asia and is now disappearing. Can you expand on the role kelong will play in the spatial and symbolic economy of your film?

Russell Morton: The kelongs are like another kind of prison for me. The man is trapped there. There are no boats tied to it. In my film, this kelong also exists in this water void. There's nowhere that he can go. He's trapped there. He also exists in this place that is not quite land, it's not quite a water. It's this in-between space, like purgatory. And also, there's the aesthetics of the kelong, these stilts. At least, the kelongs back in the 60s, or earlier than that, were built on stilts. And these stilts looked like fences. And I did some site visits to a kelong just off Punggol Marina. And when I arrived there, everything was almost like a time capsule, everything there was from another time. And I like this idea that the kelong becomes some sort of like time capsule.



Expired Super 8Mm Footage Of Life On A Kelong In Singapore Waters, 2021, Film Stills. Courtesy of The Artist.

Anna Lovecchio: And just before, you made the joke about all of us living in kelongs in a few years when the sea level will rise and we will be living an aquatic life.

Russell Morton: Yeah, that'd be quite nice, I can imagine.

Anna Lovecchio: So you're going ahead with the work. So far, several of your short films have mobilised folkloric myths, local lore, and magic rituals and it looks like this new work will be no exception.

Tell us more about your fascination with otherworldly epistemologies. What does the supernatural contribute to your understanding of the world?

Russell Morton: My previous works have some sort of interpretation of folklore, or regional folklore. These are stories that I encountered, most of them, orally. Then I try to reinterpret them and archive them with my own understanding, and my own way, and my own lens as filmmaker, as an artist. I think, for this film, the genre of horror is a nice parallel to the horrific events that happened during that riot. I think it's an appropriate response. And also in Malayan folklore, a lot of these creatures, they've become these creatures and monsters because they're cursed for some sort of wrongdoing that they've done as humans. So they have to live their life continually as these new creatures of the night. It becomes some sort of life sentence, you know, his new form of punishment which I thought is a nice metaphor to interpret further prison life.

[Audio excerpt from Russell Morton, *Saudade*, 2020. Music by Syafii Ghazali. Courtesy the artist]



Saudade, 2020, Film Still. Courtesy of the Artist.

Anna Lovecchio: A couple of times in our previous conversations, you described this new film as post-horror. Do you want to make an attempt at sketching a definition of post-horror in relation to this project?

Russell Morton: It's very early at this stage to say what this film will become. You know, it could very well be a slapstick comedy! But I think I am working towards this idea of horror. And there is a new wave of horror films that critics are defining as post-horror. In my understanding, horror traditionally comes from external forces. From monsters, from the environment, from vampires, or murderers on the loose, or a great white shark trying to eat you. These are all external forces that are trying to get to you. Post-horror comes from the inside, is something internal, like guilt, trauma, fear, things that are hard to visualise, or film, or put into pictures. But you can feel it, you can sense it. So the film has this atmosphere, this sense of horror. And yeah, it's fear that you can feel but cannot really see. This is my understanding. I think I am trying to direct my film into this 'genre box'.

Anna Lovecchio: And this makes me think of an essay that was published in our CCA book – *Place. Labour. Capital*. The essay is titled *They Come to Us without a Sound, Reflections on the Chinese Underworld* and it's written by Kenneth Dean, a professor from the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore. And he makes an interesting observation about Singapore's relationship with horror. Let me read you what he writes. So first of all, he makes a general remark saying that Singapore is one of "the main producers and consumers of ghost stories in the world", which is quite an impressive statement. And, then he goes on asking: "What does all this mean here? Is Singapore a haunted battleground, continuously reliving its historical trauma of the Japanese occupation? Have the effects of endless urban development lead to a sense of permanent deterritorialisation? Does the need for thrills indicate that you can only feel alive when you are scared to death? Or does the ghastliness of the everyday drive people into an embrace of horror?" What are your thoughts about this? Would you agree that Singapore has a special relation to horror and that there is something ghastly about the everyday here?

Russell Morton: I think it's exactly what I'm trying to do with this film: using horror as a genre to parallel horrific events, historical events of our past. Not necessarily the Japanese occupation, but another dark history of Singapore. Not necessarily Singapore, but Southeast Asia in general, we have been masters of

horror. We've created sub-genres. Well, maybe East Asia, not Southeast Asia! There's J-horror which is now a sub-genre, which is Japanese horror. There's Thai horror, also a genre on its own. Horror films have been really a big part of Singapore and Malaysia's film history as well from the P. Ramlee times of the *Sumpah Orang Minyak*, the *Orang Minyak* stories and the *Pontianak* films. I think we always had this history of fascination with horror films. An observation I've made during my time in the lab that I'm doing now, where we are filmmakers from all over the world, and one of the criticisms that I've got on my script so far was that they couldn't really pinpoint the horror, although I find it very scary already. I'm learning that people from different parts of the world have different thresholds of what horror is.

Anna Lovecchio: So this has got to trigger more reflections for you.

Russell Morton: Yeah, I think so. Something to think about.

Anna Lovecchio: As we're speaking about horror, I think we cannot not talk about sound. And please correct me if I'm wrong but I believe that no horror film can be made without a soundtrack. Horror just cannot be silent. Images alone do not have that power to change our heartbeat, music can do that. And so soundtracks are an invisible but incredibly strong directorial gesture in filmmaking as they condition the emotional response of the viewer. And I don't know if you had the chance to listen to this but a couple of months ago, Nusasonic Radio published an episode about music and film in Singapore, which is really a good one. In that episode, Tan Pin Pin talks about her *Singapore Gaga* [2005]. And she says that for her it's very hard to put music into her films because music tells the viewer what to think, how to feel. And she does not want to exert that kind of power on the spectator. And of course, she's talking about documentary filmmaking, from the point of view of a documentary filmmaker. In your filmic practice, which is not documentary, sound and music are, on the contrary, very important. You certainly do not shy away from augmenting your visuals with the sound. And you've been researching a lot of music for this film already. What have you been listening to?

Russell Morton: A very fun part of my research is trying to find music for the film. And there is a saying in the filmmaking circle that 70% of film is sound. You can watch a film with bad visuals. But you can't watch a film with bad sound. For my film, music not just an accompanying element in my film, it is a major plot point. Those prisoners in Pulau Senang, they were artists, they were musicians. And one

of my favourite discoveries during research was a clip from a radio show featuring the prisoners in a band. They were performing the song *Bengawan Solo*. And they did it for a charitable cause, to build the National Theatre. They were very talented and they performed beautifully.

One of the discoveries also is how they used music in the riot itself. After they burned the whole place to the ground, a small group of them gathered by a tree near the beach. They took out guitars, they sang songs, they danced, they ate cake, using music during this time of revolt, you know. That scene, when I read it, it just read so cinematically. Something that I want to capture in the film, in some way. I am looking at old films, also. I found this Japanese propaganda film *Marai no Tora*, which means "Tiger of Malaya", made in 1943 by Koga Masato. It's about a real life character. His name was Tani Yutaka, he was a Japanese spy. And in the film, he was depicted as some sort of Robin Hood character. He would steal from the rich and give to the poor. There's a scene in the film where he has just robbed a rich British family's house and with his gang, they were called the Harimau gang or the 'tiger gang', they are huddling in the forest over a campfire.



Russell Morton, Residencies OPEN, 18 September 2021. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

They were celebrating this new loot, which they got from the British. They started burning the British flag, burning a Western woman's dress. And they broke out in a song, Rasa Sayang. A Japanese version of this song, but it was still the Malayan folk song Rasa Sayang.

[Audio excerpt from Tani Yutaka, Marai no Tora, 1943 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ITigyqta_k]

They were celebrating. I found this very nice reference for what the prisoners [in Pulau Senang] did on the day of the riot. I've also been listening to a lot of music from the era and from the region as well, which I think I will incorporate into my film.



Russell Morton and Anna Lovecchio recording AiRCAST on 27 September 2021. Courtesy of NTU CCA Singapore.

Anna Lovecchio: That sounds awesome. Thank you so much for sharing about your ideas and thoughts. I know it's not easy to talk about a project that's still in the process of becoming so thank you for being so generous. One of the songs you were playing a lot in the studio when I was coming to visit you, was very nice. Shall we end on its notes? Do you want to play it again?

Russell Morton: Yes! It's a really fun dance number. This is *Siapa Dia*, which means Who is he?. It is by Zainab Majid, made in 1958. This mysterious name of "Who is he?", I think will play a big part in my film as well. Here it is.

[Audio excerpt from "Siapa Dia" by Zainab Majid, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gDHPP6K-mA>]

Anna Lovecchio: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit our website at www.ntu.ccasingapore.org. You can sign up to our newsletter or follow us on the major social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our next Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast. AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore. This episode featured Singaporean filmmaker Russell Morton in conversation with myself, Anna Lovecchio. I am also the editor of this podcast. Kristine Tan is the Programme Manager, Rudi Osman the Audio Engineer. The opening and closing music compositions of this podcast were created by Artist-in-Residence Tini Aliman with field recordings taken at different times of the day in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on September 27, 2021. Thank you for listening.