

AiRCAST #11

ZACHARY CHAN

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Zachary Chan recording AiRCAST, 20 December 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Nadia Amalina: Welcome to the second season of AiRCAST. On this podcast, we visit the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore nestled on the fringe of a vibrant rainforest in Gillman Barracks. In this series of open-ended conversations, we invite different guests to probe the mind of our Artists-in-Residence and unfold some of the ideas, materials, processes, influences, and research methodologies behind their practice.

My name is Nadia Amalina. I am the Programmes Manager at NTU CCA, and I co-edit this podcast alongside Dr Anna Lovecchio, curator and Assistant Director of Programmes at NTU CCA Singapore.

This episode features a conversation between two multidisciplinary creatives who are also previous collaborators: Artist-in-Residence Zachary Chan and Singaporean playwright Joel Tan. The two come together for a fascinating exchange revolving around Zachary's research into the religion he grew up with, Pentecostal Christianity, as well as the practice of spiritual mapping and strategic-level spiritual warfare. This research thread unraveled out of Restless Topographies, a project they developed together during a residency at the Goethe Institute Singapore last year. Throughout the conversation, they weave together personal experiences, insights, and revelations, with discussions of the historical anecdotes and religious texts that Zachary has been poring over during his time in residence at NTU CCA Singapore. They also contemplate upon Zachary's proclivity for collaborations and how the residency has afforded him time to focus on his solo artistic practice.

Before they take it away, a quick introduction.

Spanning several mediums, the work of Zachary Chan reflects his composite background in visual communications, graphic design, and sonic arts. His practice often unfolds through collaborations with other artists, and he has written music and designed sound for experimental films, theatre plays, video games, storytelling, and art installations.

Joel Tan is a writer and performer based between London and Singapore. His interdisciplinary practice examines the ways in which politics distort the personal and spiritual, exploring subjects ranging from colonial history, nature, queer experience, and contemporary Singapore life.

Joel Tan: Hi Zach, how are you today?

Zachary Chan: Hi. How am I today? I guess today is fine. I woke up quite sleepy and anxious about this.

Joel Tan: Why are you anxious?

Zachary Chan: I don't know. I guess because right now, it's really the start of the research. It's not like I have been with this material for years and years and I can just recite it. I might make factual errors!

Joel Tan: So there's a sort of anxiety about presenting the material? But we have had chats about it, and I feel like you have been steeped in it. If not actively researching, you've been steeped in a kind of 'lived research' of this for quite a while. I feel it's at your fingertips, whether or not you think it is. So Zach, I've known you for quite a while. We've worked together on a bunch of projects in the past year and a half, two years. And one thing that has always struck me about you is how unpredictable your practice is, you do many different things. You are a graphic designer, a musician, and now you are moving into research-based contemporary art making as well, which I think is super exciting. Could we talk a little about your practice and how you see all these things overlap? What holds these disparate aspects of your practice together?

Zachary Chan: I started off in sound. I always knew I wanted to be a graphic designer, but I didn't score well enough to get into a graphic design course, so the next available thing was sound. I thought, okay, let's just try it out. After that,

I did well in school, and I got good enough grades to study graphic design at NTU. So that's the background. And during the course of my study, I came across gamelan. One of the projects when I was doing my diploma was to create a sound library of all the gamelan instruments. Through that, I became acquainted with the music of gamelan, which really opened this whole trajectory, that I would have never otherwise thought I would pursue in my life, leading all the way to here. I came to realise that [the reason] why I am interested in all these things stems from a similar kind of trauma which really came from childhood.

Joel Tan: Can I ask you to elaborate about how immersing yourself in the world of gamelan unlocked the trajectory for you? Can you talk about what that trajectory is? And then, maybe, you also want to elaborate about the kind of trauma that you find yourself circling around in all the work that you do.

Zachary Chan: I am from a middle/upper class, social, economic background. I am Chinese. Gamelan music would not typically be a feature that comes out in any aspect of my life, if I were to remain in this bubble. That is why I described it as surprising. But at the same time, I feel it was necessary for me as a person, because my identity, it's really been such an important thing in my life. That is, how I see myself in relation to the material and aesthetic world that we live in. So why I talk about this trauma is because I was born in a conservative Christian family and I grew up with the belief that anything non-Christian and non-Chinese, by extension, was something demonic. To participate in gamelan was already a very subversive act if you look at it through this Chinese/Christian lens.

Joel Tan: I am familiar with that because I also grew up in a similar background. I remember very distinctly being told as a young Christian that, you know, certain practices like yoga, which are very steeped in spiritual beliefs from, non-Christian sources, can open the gateway to certain negative spiritual influences. So is that what you mean that when you started dabbling in gamelan that pulled you in a very different direction from the bubble that you were born into?

Zachary Chan: I mean, all this is in hindsight, and I don't know if it really is what it is or I am just making up reasons for why things happened. But I think I was always trying to find a way to challenge the assumptions I grew up with, that my parents imparted to me. You could really say it was an act of rebellion. Yeah, but I mean, this is me intellectualizing it years after, but at that point I just wanted to pursue the feeling of the music.

Joel Tan: What was that feeling like for you?

Zachary Chan: Oh, I mean, when you encounter gamelan, one of my friends always says this, which is maybe now not so nice but, basically, when white people first encountered gamelan, one of them described it as: oh, it sounds like heaven, the Christian heaven where everyone is singing their own praise to God, but everything harmonises even though everyone... they're doing their own thing. And that's really the kind of experience I got from gamelan when I first encountered it in its proper form.

Joel Tan: Right, a kind of harmony that emerges out of difference.

Zachary Chan: Yes, because this music is heterophonic, right? But not in the sense that everyone is playing the same melody. Everyone is following this melodic contour but in their own way according to what the instrument or their part in the music is. It's not completely heterophonic, yet is not harmony-based music as well. It creates a kind of effect where it seems like everyone is just singing their own thing, or playing their own thing, but it somehow matches.

Joel Tan: And of course, so much of it is steeped in ritual practice. And so much of it is steeped also in stories and religious beliefs of the region as well. It's not just a musical form. It's also a deeply social ritual.

Zachary Chan: Yes, but I must say that it is also very secular life as much as it is ritual and social. And you see this music as a part of the culture. Yes, of course, it's specific to indigenous Javanese culture but we also see it being played in churches, in Buddhist temples, or monasteries. In Java, it's really... it's a kind of medium for a wide variety of expressions. But of course, my parents thought I was doing something Quranic and Islamic. And they were very unhappy with that.

[Audio excerpt from the sound design for the theatre production, *Move _____, As We Move*, 2017. Courtesy Zachary Chan.]

Joel Tan: I think this is a theme we can explore in this chat, and I find it just quite poetic how gamelan as a musical form is, as you say, heterophonic and embraces within itself all these different possibilities, different kinds of sonorities, different

rhythms that blend into one. But then of course, the dogma that you and I were raised in is very much quite a unifying and uniform kind of practice already. These interesting tensions emerge, right? I find that fascinating. But maybe, before we get into that, let's talk about how you got into this work that you are doing while you are in residence at NTU CCA Singapore. Tell us broadly what the research you are doing is about, and then maybe we could talk about how you got into it.

Zachary Chan: Yes. When you and I were doing research about the southern coastline...

Joel Tan: This was for an artwork that we eventually made at the Singapore Art Museum called *Dioramas for Tanjong Rimau*, which we worked on in the better part of 2021 together with Zarina Muhammad.

Zachary Chan: Yes, very important person! One of the readings that came up was this thing about... because the southern coastline is this stretch that has been contested by many people, many different organisations and beliefs. One of the contestants, if you might, was this group of churches called LoveSingapore. The example that I read [about] happened in 1998. On Labour Day in 1998, there was this massive walkathon where 40,000 people attended and I was also in the audience as a child.

Joel Tan: You were there? I forgot about this.

Zachary Chan: I mean, of course I had no idea what I was doing. But even then, as a child, I knew that even though to the public it looked like a walkathon that raised money for charity, we were briefed in the church that it's actually a kind of magical ritual, if I want to put it in terms where everyone can understand, for the cleansing of the land and for committing this land to the Christian God. The title of all the walks is "Take the City Walk", so there's a kind of conquering, vibe to it.

The kind of logic behind it is very interesting to me. Basically, this Christian group, LoveSingapore, was actually formed from a global network called the Spiritual Warfare Network and they changed the name to LoveSingapore because it sounded too militant. And what this worldview is, they believe that the world is governed by demons and ritual action has to be taken in order to defeat the demons so that the church can conduct ministry and its evangelical efforts. If

they don't defeat the demons, they will be blocked in some way or another. So if they try to evangelise or they try to do stuff, then they would be overcome with a lot of hardship and...

Joel Tan: Demonic obstacles!

Zachary Chan: ...obstacles, yes, everyday obstacles, which somehow get imbued with this extraordinary meaning, that a literal demon is blocking the path! I am talking about these demons as literal demons and not abstract evil. They have names, they have wills, they are basically just like you and me.

Joel Tan: To give our listeners some context: what we were exploring during the residency at the Goethe-Institut was broadly about the history of the southern coastline of Singapore, roughly the area like around Sentosa leading up to Harbourfront, and parts like Chinatown and Keppel Harbour as well. Because the exhibition we were eventually going to participate in was housed in that area, we wanted to investigate the histories of the area. And we learned so many things about that area. Primarily, it is one of the most ancient routes into... not just Singapore, but to wider Asia. If you're coming from the west, there was a major kind of maritime channel. And, you know, the contestation over that stretch dates back at least to the 17th/16th centuries. And then, as we know, today in Singapore, it's a massive site of like land reclamation projects, major redevelopment.

So basically, the interesting thing about the southern coast is that, like you said, there's many people contesting to make meaning of it. And the context in which this prayer, what you mentioned, came up was that it was part of like a widened island-wide series of walks where they will go and secure the Northern Gateway, the Eastern Gateway, the Western Gateway and the Southern Gateway to create this boundary of Christian protection over the island. And we found that very exciting. And we couldn't quite tease out this strand during what eventually became *Dioramas for Tanjong Rimau* because the focus was quite different. It seems like you've taken that strand of your interest into what you're doing at NTU CCA. Can you tell us a little bit about how you're developing that strand? What are you researching while you're in residency?

Zachary Chan: Sure. I'm really trying to understand the spiritual reality



Joel Tan, Zachary Chan, Zarina Muhammad, *Dioramas for Tanjong Rimau*, installation view, 2022. Courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

that Pentecostal Christians live through every day. If we talk about what Pentecostalism is, it's basically a version of Christianity that emphasises magical and mystical aspects. Pentecost is the event that happens in Acts 2 where the disciples of Jesus —this is after Jesus had already rose to heaven, disappeared from Earth— they were all in one place. They were conducting prayers, regular prayers, when they were suddenly visited by the Holy Spirit, which is described as this thunderous wind that enveloped the room and sort of possessed and filled everyone in it. And then all of them were given the gifts of tongues, which is basically ecstatic utterances, which I mean, what it sounds like to the average person would be just unintelligible noises that one would make when one has a very religious or spiritual experience. I don't want to say unintelligible noises because some people can interpret these sounds. But they are a series of random sounds, if you might, that one supposedly can't control it, just like to start shouting, or saying 'enjoy' because they are experiencing the experiential reality of the Holy Spirit, which is something supernatural and cannot be understood intellectually.

Joel Tan: To clarify, Pentecostalism is a kind of branch of Christianity that...

Zachary Chan: Okay, Pentecostal Christianity is a literal denomination, but we can describe all charismatic churches to have Pentecostal strains in them. Because the Pentecostal strain is basically the emphasis on the spirit, so you have like, the power dimension of faith, which means you believe that through prayer and through faith you can create real, literal change in the world, the spirit of demons, and also the charismata, which are the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to aid Christians to fulfil their Christian destiny. Some of these gifts are not limited to miraculous healing, speaking in tongues, power of prophecy, power to exorcise demons, power to discern where demons are, ability to interpret tongues, but also visions and dreams.

Joel Tan: Is your interest in Pentecostalism for A) because you grew up in that tradition, but then also B) because it's become one of the more prevalent forms of Christianity that is practiced in Singapore today?

Zachary Chan: I would say that... Why this interests me is because it's a reality that I experienced first-hand, and to live most of your life in a world where literal demons are inhabiting things, from objects to places, really kind of like how do I say... it's a very strange place to be, especially when there are so many assumptions that you don't challenge until much later on in your life. And it's a reality that my parents and my family members still live in. There's that very strong pull because I want to reach a point where... I guess it's a way to detach myself. Also, having this intellectual curiosity helps me to detach myself when it gets too difficult to handle in real life. And so I've been always obsessed with religions that are polytheistic. When I was young, after being taught Bible stories, I borrowed literally every book from our Hougang library about ancient Egyptian religion because it was the only thing that was referenced there. So I knew all the names of the major pantheons of gods. And then I went on to other religions, like ancient Mayans and Aztecs, and also Hinduism and Buddhism much later in my life. I've always been drawn to ways that one can map out or make sense of the spirit world. And this kind of Pentecostal Christian strand would be a natural follow-up because it's so close to me but now I can afford to have some distance from it after all of that.

Joel Tan: In a way, it was too close at the time to look at it.

Zachary Chan: You can't. How do you how do you look at something objectively if you... I don't even want to say 'objectively'. How do you even begin to look at something if it's tied up with so many other difficult emotions, right? This is not to say that having these emotions is a bad thing. They might add to the work or whatever. But yes, I think now it's easier.

Joel Tan: I have another question for you. I noticed earlier on, where you were describing what you are doing, it was like you are talking about the research you're doing and NTU CCA as a way to understand the spiritual and I think you use the word "magical reality" of Pentecostal Christianity. I think you also used the term "magical practices" to describe these practices earlier, and that's interesting to me. I wonder if you could elaborate on that a little bit? As someone growing up in the Christian church is so unusual to hear practices like spiritual warfare, which I'm very familiar with growing up in that tradition as well, or speaking in tongues, or these charismatic practices described as magical practices. And I think some people might even bristle at that description, but I wonder if you could talk a little bit about why you use that term. And what's some of your thinking around that?

Zachary Chan: If we describe other indigenous practices as magic, what's the difference when you are operating in a spiritual realm? Once you are operating in a dimension that cannot be comprehended, that you cannot understand based on science, if you might, then I feel it's fair to say it's magical. The kind of basis for spiritual warfare and strategic-level spiritual warfare which I am currently researching on is that when Eve was tempted in the Garden of Eden, God lost control of the world. I know this sounds controversial, but basically it is what it is. I mean, this is what these Christians believe in. And now the world is in control of demons and Satan. And so, Christians navigate this lived reality where there is a demon everywhere waiting to plunder their homes and infiltrate their bodies. I feel like it's safe to say that these are magical practices because they are essentially making rituals to try and protect and safeguard the way they want to live in their own interest. If you look at it from a non-insider's point of view, they suddenly look no different than other kinds of fields. It might look like witchcraft, you know? And if we are going to call witchcraft magic, why aren't Christian technologies to battle demons magical also?

Yeah, so if I could explain some of these spiritual technologies. The idea is that God didn't reveal a lot about the spiritual dimension in the Bible. And so, these men who founded this whole spiritual mapping and spiritual warfare, their deal is that they have to be like scientists, and experiment, and use experiential evidence as data to see whether their methods are working or not. And then, it can quickly go south. I mean, the critics have argued how is this any different from animism? And their claim is that they are guided by the Holy Spirit. And if they're guided by the Holy Spirit, then everything is permissible.

Joel Tan: And you can justify it doctrinally as well?

Zachary Chan: That's very debatable. And one characteristic of Pentecostalism is that it's amorphous. At the start of it, this loose movement was seen as too indigenous, too wild, too heretical because it was so animated. And the idea that humans, even though they say this power is not held by humans, but it really looked like it is, it looks like someone has a magical ability to heal you. It looks like a person can exorcise demons from you, even though it's all like from the



Zachary Chan and Joel Tan recording AiRCAST, 20 December 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Holy Spirit, it really looks like it's people doing it. And so they've sort of listed out how demons can be present in our world. And there are four: one is that you can contact demons through physical objects; you can contact demons through the curses of others; you can contact demons through genealogical transmission. So this is the sin like inherited seeds from your father. For example, like if you had an ancestor who was trans, then maybe, and if you turn out like, non-binary then...

Joel Tan: It is a generational curse.

Zachary Chan: Exactly. And then the last one is like the vulnerability to demons because of geographical locations. And that is really unique to this spiritual mapping and strategic-level spiritual warfare.

Joel Tan: The idea that there are somehow concentrations of demonic energy in certain locales, or like geographical locations, is that right?

Zachary Chan: Yes, and because I said earlier that they conducted experiments...

Joel Tan: Who is this "they" that you are talking about, by the way?

Zachary Chan: They refers to Peter Wagner and his crew of people who started out from do I do, I don't have the exact names but basically, they are one of the early and first proponents of spiritual mapping and strategic-level spiritual warfare. And there's like a direct lineage to Singapore, because the LoveSingapore movement grew out from the Spiritual Warfare Network, which is headed by Peter Wagner. And so early on, they had made experiments in various parts of the world like Argentina where they found that they could not minister or evangelise until they had broken a demonic bond in that area. And we see this happening throughout the world and various pastors of mega churches, repeating their origin stories, and always starts with breaking the demon from the area. And how these demons are discerned, they usually look at the indigenous practices, or historical events in the area. There's almost a pseudoscientific or anthropological method that they employ. If I can give one example, Pastor Cho Yong-gi, from South Korea—who has the largest church in the world with at one point of time, 700,000 members—he claimed that his ministry only broke after he exorcised a demon that was possessing a paralysed person's body. And then, he said, the sky broke. Basically something in the air broke and then all degrees of the Holy Spirit

started to enter and he had a massive multiplication. And he also described using spiritual technologies, having groups of people praying constantly at every hour. My mom also does this, sometimes at 1am... she'll just go to church and pray and that's because they have someone praying there constantly.

Joel Tan: There is a roster of people praying 24/7?

Zachary Chan: Yes. Because if you believe in the power dimension of faith and intercessory prayer, you believe that you are actually generating some kind of forcefield, or shield, against demonic influence in the city. These are some of the technologies they use.

Joel Tan: It's very interesting listening you speak. I love the term spiritual technology, or even like magical technology. It seems that you are studying Pentecostal practices. And I think these are relatively recent Pentecostal practices, right? Because from what I know of people like Wagner and the spiritual mapping movement, you may correct me if I'm wrong, it dates back to the 1980s, 1970s/80s.

Zachary Chan: Late 1980s

Joel Tan: Yeah, and so it's a relatively contemporary strand of Pentecostalism. And it's really interesting what you're doing studying it like a sort of magical community or studying it as a cosmology on its own rather than, as you know, Christianity as a religion is like a specific branch of it and you're exploring the very specific, and some might say, idiosyncratic spiritual practices and technologies of this magical community so to speak. Could you tell us a little bit more about what else you've uncovered in your research about the cosmological makeup of this group?

Zachary Chan: Throughout the history of Pentecostalism we see it as extremely flexible and because Pentecostalism has always been a very flexible and adaptable way to approach Christianity, there have been many varied and interesting cosmologies that have developed from it. For example, we have writers like Pittman who describes the world of demons in great detail. So I think if, and I may be wrong, because I only read it once and then I shut it. But he basically died. And he went to heaven. And then God, I don't know... it's one of those stories where

you die, then you go to heaven, and then later, you are revived and you bring back the message.

Joel Tan: ...the message?

Zachary Chan: Yeah, his tale was that he wanted God to show him the world of demons and he saw them. He describes this in great detail. There are three layers of heaven, demons, operate from the second level of heaven. And they are large beings, incredibly large, like 2.4 meters tall. Literally, he gives the height. And he describes how they look. They look like ancient Roman warriors who are glistening and sparkling. And then from then there are cords that connect to Earth. And the minor, or the lesser demons, travel along these cords like messengers. And other demons he describes look like American businessmen, for example, and those govern greed, wealth. And then there's more indigenous-looking demons, which are half-animal and half-human. And then they are also really strange demons that look like frogs and supposedly incite a lot of lust in you.

Joel Tan: None of this is actually described biblically. Would you describe this person as an influential figure?

Zachary Chan: In that period of time!

Joel Tan: Which was?

Zachary Chan: In the 1980s, he was quoted in many publications about spiritual warfare and how to fight demons. Back then, it was a very real and lived reality for a lot of Christian people. The whole idea of spiritual mapping itself is really world-building. And in Singapore, it was also conducted here. So basically, spiritual mapping is an exercise which almost employs a playful, psycho-geographic aspect to it, because you are supposed to travel the land by car or by foot—basically, you've got to be on the land—and then you discern where the demons are with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Joel Tan: Or your special spiritual compass.

Zachary Chan: And so in Singapore, it was mapped like the north, south, east

and west were gateways. And gateways are where through the collective sins of the city demons can enter. So gateways are very important. The north was the Causeway, East was the airport, south was Tanjong Pagar port, and to the west, it was the factories in Tuas. In 1984, a group of pastors passed to these four points to pray and clean the city. And in 1995, they started these walkathons. Which the routes were planned because they discerned where demonic strongholds were and where they needed to pray over in order to defeat these demonic strongholds. And this sort of mapping exercise, it's a global thing. Notably, we have the 10/40 window, which is... basically, it's a block. It's a block in which where there are the least saved people. Basically, there's a lot of unsaved behaviour there—and when I say unsaved, I mean they're not Christians...

Joel Tan: Pre-converts!

Zachary Chan: ...and, also, it's where the world's major religions come from. They are supposedly the most impoverished nations, which, you know, now we all know is because of colonialism. Back then, I mean not back then, even now still, they think it is the work of demons, literal demons. It's been mapped out extensively. And there's a book called *The 10/40 Window*, where every country is listed down and they list down what is the main religion, who are the people you should pray for, and specific power sites. And these power sites are gateways, or demonic portals, which hold a lot of influence and authority. There's an entry for Malaysia, which lists the Shah Alam mosque in Kuala Lumpur as a demonic stronghold, and also the Snake Temple in Penang because, you know, snakes are very potent. Also, they said to pray over religious events like Thaipusam, or Ramadan [because] they believe that when other religions are conducting their rituals and festivals, that generates a lot of demonic energy.

Joel Tan: I think to put all this back to, I guess, the personal, it seems quite illuminating that understanding this cosmology in a way helps you to understand the personal and the political, right? Some impulses behind the way certain faith groups operate. On a very simple level for my life, my parents were very devout Christians, but my mom more. Whenever we used to visit relatives who were very devout Buddhists... because we walked into the house, and there would be all this religious iconography and then she will feel like: Oh, I feel something, there are demonic forces at work here. This strand of thinking is very oppositional, very territorial, very contesting, and I'm hearing a lot of that in what you're describing.



Zachary Chan, *Residencies OPEN*, installation view, 14-15 January 2023. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Because the cosmology is so fundamentally oppositional, it's about geographical space, it's about unseating demonic forces. Many demonic forces actually often tie to other religious practices. It's about clearing the space. And, of course, that kind of thinking informs how people behave as individuals. But more importantly, and interestingly, and urgently, the way they behave as collectives as well. There's something quite illuminating about your research because I've lived with this in my head for a very long time. As people who have grown up in the church, we see this very clearly. But I don't think I've seen very much research done about it, or at least not in an art context, to digest these things and present them in a way, and then dramatise them, I find that very fascinating. And, I guess, in the context of Singapore, this is useful to understand one of the major political forces at work in this country right now which is Evangelical fundamentalist Christianity. There's no point being shy about it. They are a major social and political force in this country, and they have made themselves very well-known. And they intervene very publicly in public life, and in policy. We need only turn to recent events like the repeal of 377A and the debate that happened around it to see what a powerful block this faith group is. And the thing I always find very interesting about them

is that they speak in very specific terms like family, for example, to justify their opposition to 377A [repeal]. But if you spend more time in those spaces and try and get underneath the skin of their cosmology, as you are doing, you realise that there's a lot more to how they see the world than simply family values. So, I think there's something interesting there about how when you understand the cosmology behind it, you understand them better as people. And that's useful to me.

Zachary Chan: Yeah, if you believe in a literal mapping of where demons are in specific areas, in specific territories and geographical localities, then eventually, inadvertently, large groups of people also become mapped as being with demons, and [they will be] demonised. And so that is where, unfortunately, the exclusivity sets in.

Joel Tan: In an early chat we had about this, Pentecostalism didn't always used to be this way. Right? And you have alluded to this earlier about how early forms of Pentecostalism were a bit more, I can't remember the term you used, "indigenous" I think you said. It was seen as a sort of marginal practice; it was also very amorphous. And I wonder if that has implications on the way it was maybe more open than it is today.

Zachary Chan: Historically, if we want to look... the history of how Pentecostal Christianity is conceived, there are two main ways to look at it. One is monocentric, which kind of emerges from this revival it in Los Angeles, and it's called the Azusa Street Revival. It happened very much like the series of events in Acts 2.

Joel Tan: What year was it?

Zachary Chan: This was 1906. It was an African American congregation led by William J. Seymour. It was just a congregation of seven and one day, they were struck off their chairs while they were praying, and they had experienced a Spirit baptism. So they were ecstatic, speaking in tongues and shouting. This kind of like small event became a pivotal movement because within two years, it had spread to 50 countries. They were having prayer services three times a day, every single day. And during these meetings you will see multiracial, multi-ethnic [gatherings] between different social classes, all attending and joining. And it was seen as very

revolutionary because it was the height of the racial segregation laws back then, in America. And that's just one example. And if we want to look at it from like a polycentric perspective, which refers to this, spirit of Pentecostalism happening simultaneously in various parts of the world, unrelated to the Azusa Street Revival, we can see Pentecostal like revivals happening in China, in India, in Java, led by various people.

Joel Tan: Around the same time?

Zachary Chan: Before... in the 1800s. And they always had a kind of anti-establishment resistance to hegemonic powers going on. If I just can give very briefly some examples. We have this pastor in northern China in Shanxi. His name is Pastor Xi Shengmo and literally means "overcome". Yeah, so if we want to talk about pre-Azusa Street revival... a revival is a renewed interest in the religion but also for charismatic Christians it's also a very intense religious meeting, where it's very intense spiritually and where often there are Spirit baptisms. So, um, yeah, pre-Azusa Street Revival, we can look at this example of Pastor Xi in China, and he grew up in a literary class. And he was formally educated as a Confucian scholar, but because there was this empty gap in his life that couldn't be filled, he turned to opium and became an opium addict. And it was only through Christianity and through the baptism of the Holy Spirit that he was able to overcome his opium addictions. And he described like the week he had in cold turkey as being visited by all sorts of demonic forces. Whilst we don't have like the ecstatic speaking of tongues, there was definitely demonic exorcism. And also, miraculous healing, because later on he set up over 40 drug rehabilitation centres and he was given a secret recipe by the Holy Spirit to concoct this TCM pill that was a natural remedy to counter opium addiction. In these two examples that I've just briefly described, we can see that Pentecostal like traits or Pentecostal charismatic beliefs, or gifts of the Spirit, were often used when people had no other kind of power. And they had to rely on magic. I mean, that's the whole thing about witchcraft, right? When you feel powerless, you need to resort to otherworldly means. And this is just another example in that long magical tradition, if you might. And I think there have been scholars who have said that eventually when charismatic gifts became accepted in the church, because they couldn't remove its African-ness, in that it's animated...

Joel Tan: What you're talking about when you say the African-ness of it, you're referring to?

Zachary Chan: It doesn't look white, it looks very indigenous, the way they worship God. I mean, if you imagine like, this was a point of time where secessionism was largely accepted. So when they couldn't remove that from it, they created their own version of it and excluded the black people from joining. So that's what eventually happened. And that is why there still is racial segregation in churches today.

Joel Tan: In a way, Pentecostalism and charismatic practices became more mainstream, or absorbed into the mainstream church, while their origins have always existed outside, on the fringes, primarily amongst disenfranchised groups of colour or indigenous communities.

Zachary Chan: Exactly

Joel Tan: And then, from my understanding of the Pentecostal church, it becomes, especially in the context of Singapore, associated with more upwardly mobile classes. There are strands of Pentecostalism, such as the prosperity gospel, which are very intrinsically tied to upward mobility. I think, how we ended up with the situation we have now where they're massively prosperous, very big, mega churches filled with relatively well-to-do people who have a lot of power and influence. It's an interesting trajectory, from a fringe group to something that has become so hegemonic in its own way, right?

Zachary Chan: Throughout history, there's been this push-pull with Pentecostalism and scholars have traced it back to the time when Jesus was alive, there was already this conception of otherness. Unfortunately, with something that's so free, it becomes very easy for people in power to morph it to suit their own interests. The whole basis for the prosperity gospel is so funny, but it's also widely accepted, that if you are a good Christian, naturally, you will be blessed with wealth. And if you're not, it means you have some generational sin, or curse or there's some demon affecting you adversely. It's very strange, because when I was young, I also did prayer-walking things, and we would go to one-room flats... Basically, it's so easy to discern where demons are, I just go to a poor person's area. And so we went there. And then like, we prayed over them thinking that it would really make them rich.

Joel Tan: Yeah, I guess what's interesting too, based on my understanding of

the history of the Christian church in Singapore charismatic Pentecostalism became more prevalent, I think, around the 1980s in Singapore. Prior to that the Christian church in Singapore, was a bit more conservative. But at the same time, it was also quite Marxist and socialists, in its impulses. Its outreach was to the poor was conducted on anti-hegemonic terms. It was about uplifting the Asiatic poor, so to speak, who were ravaged by decades of colonialism. And it was quite an anti-colonial movement as well, and it was very critical of the state. And it's just so interesting to hear the inversion of that where, you know, poverty is not understood in structural terms but in demonic terms, you know, and the way that the lens has shifted so much, and that's quite fascinating to me.

I guess we could talk about we could talk about this all day. But I think I'm very interested to hear how all of this I guess is manifesting as art. What kind of forms has the research been taking? Where has it led you?

Zachary Chan: Earlier I talked about how I was really into the ancient Egyptian religion. So that sort of interests has continued in the way I'm trying to describe the Pentecostal universe and cosmology by making tapestries that draw from various religious traditions of describing cosmological diagrams through visuals, if you might. What I'm doing now is basically making cloth tapestries that describe some of the mappings of how demons operate in our world. And these works look very childlike. And, how do you say... naive? Is that a term that we use? And that's intentional in two ways. Because much of my childhood, any kind of object you bring home can become demonic, and most often these are toys.

Joel Tan: I think because of the preoccupation with the spiritual susceptibility of children, remember that the Smurf dolls in the 90s were considered totally demonic?

Zachary Chan: Yes, this is because like, I think there was a drug aspect to it. LSD, shrooms, and stuff. And then they are blue. Then, Furbies are also evil!

Joel Tan: Yes, they were evil. They do look quite evil! And do you remember the Troll dolls? Those little Troll dolls from the 90s with long hair? I remember in my church, they were considered bad news as well.

Zachary Chan: Yes. I mean, so many things, right? Pokemon, Digimon, Magic: the Gathering.

Joel Tan: Harry Potter... Did you ever attend a Harry Potter book burning?

Zachary Chan: I did. But it wasn't a Harry Potter book burning, it was just a church camp!

Joel Tan: Where they burnt Harry Potter books?

Zachary Chan: On the last day, they said: please bring in all your items that are possible. I mean, they didn't say it in these terms exactly, but basically [the message was] bring in any things that are possible portals for demons to enter and infiltrate in your life. So things that turned up were Harry Potter, Goosebumps and even like Animorphs, I don't even know how Animorphs is like...

Joel Tan: That's because, I think, being able to turn into animals is a kind of witchy thing... So we were talking about this, because you were trying to explain

why it is all your work you're making has childlike aspect to it, and why you're creating like soft toys.

Zachary Chan: Basically, I'm creating soft tapestries and soft toys. On one hand, they're supposed to be self-portraits, on the other hand, they are supposed to be like cosmological diagrams describing the Pentecostal universe. But also, if you were to interpret these works from another religious point of view, then it would kind of like describe a power encounter. A lot of the work that I'm making have this praying man with a hole in his chest. And this hole is supposed to describe the body as fragile and porous and ready to be possessed by demons. And then there's like a little flower around a hole. But if you look at it, let's say, from a Buddhist perspective, you see a man like in a praying position that embodies emptiness because there is a hole here.

Joel Tan: A kind of positive emptiness.



Zachary Chan, Residencies OPEN, installation view, 14-15 January 2023. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Zachary Chan: Yes. And when two worldviews are clashing, that's what Pentecostal Christians call a 'power encounter'. Ultimately, it's supposed to be that God's worldview will prove that your worldview has no foundation, something like that. So I'm trying to describe all these different interests and different concepts in these soft toys that basically look cute and stupid.

Joel Tan: I find it very interesting. All that is a shifting of lens, isn't it? It's actually Pentecostalism's insistence on its territorial supremacy that puts it into conflict, right? Because actually, many beliefs and spiritualities can sort of coexist, right?

Zachary Chan: Yeah

Joel Tan: Can we talk a little bit about some other kind of like expressions or forms that your work is taking or like any activations that you're hoping to create in this space?

Zachary Chan: I am planning to describe or retell many Pentecostal stories from many historical figures that have laid the path for where this kind of version of Pentecostal Christianity is at now in a kind of performance.

Joel Tan: So you're planning to create some performances around it as well?

Zachary Chan: I mean, yes, I am trying. But it seems a bit difficult...

Joel Tan: Okay. Well, I think we're coming around to the end of our time. I will end with one big question: if there's one kind of major learning from the research you've been doing, or any major revelation that you found particularly arresting and fascinating and that you're quite preoccupied by, or surprised by, what might that be?

Zachary Chan: At the start, it was very negative. I really hated whatever I was researching. When I read something, I'd just roll my eyes until it goes back to the front, you know? But now I'm filled with empathy. I no longer bear any grudge towards the faith that fucked me up in so many ways.

Joel Tan: What do you think it is about this steeping yourself in all this research that's opened this up for you?



Zachary Chan, Residencies OPEN, installation view, 14-15 January 2023. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Zachary Chan: Pentecostal Christians, like the rest of us, they're struggling, right. And something like the prosperity gospel really gives them so much hope. And I can see the appeal of it, if you can point your troubles and worries to a demon, then the demon becomes this space, or the demonic becomes the space where, you know, all the bad things that have happened to you in your life is not really just because it might be your fault, or your wrongdoings, or whatever. There's something greater than you at work. In Singapore, we might feel powerless because... of how things are here, right? So being in a spirit religion, like Pentecostal Christianity, really gives somebody or someone who might not have much going for them a kind of extraordinary purpose in which they can navigate their lives. And so, I accept that as this helps you, and I'm glad that is helping you.

Joel Tan: Yeah, that is quite lovely. I'm happy for you insofar as it seems that these traumas of growing up in that religious space are very deeply rooted. I think it sounds like one way for you of overcoming them is to, in a very obsessive way, get underneath the skin of it and the thinking behind it. It's wonderful to me that you've arrived at a place of empathy, and that is quite surprising indeed. Another thing that's interesting to me is that this residency is the first time you are embarking on a very solo research-driven project because the bulk of your work in the past, including what we've done obviously, has been quite collaborative in nature. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that dynamic between your previous collaborative processes and now this more individual one?

Zachary Chan: Why I like to collaborate is because when I did my schoolwork, and I did quite a massive, ambitious, artistic project at the end of it, I realised that I was doing a lot of things that were not right. Some of the things that I did later on, I felt were extractive and wrong. What I did in my final year project was to map Singapore in using banyan trees as notes to imagine the city. Our imagination of the cities is always about MRT stations or malls, so I wanted to propose using banyan trees as a different...

Joel Tan: Topography?

Zachary Chan: Yes, and some of these things delved into, again, personal histories and traumas. One of them was about a space where migrant workers would congregate and enjoy the day having picnics. And it was always in the

shade of a banyan tree. I went there and I interviewed them. In exchange, I would give them a Polaroid and say, take photos of your friends and then keep all the photos. Because I don't have a real anthropological training, I feel like maybe I didn't do research correctly? And that was a really big fear of mine that I ended up being extractive and capitalist, ultimately, in the production of art. This fear made me want to experience artmaking through collaboration first, because then at least the burden is collective and not just on me. My training is aesthetic, right? It's not sociological, anthropological. If I go with someone else who might have that sort of training, then I can lend my strengths elsewhere. So that's why collaborations have always been more fun for me because I find artmaking to be quite a burden, honestly. Is that okay to say? And I don't really want to do things where I feel burdened. It's not fun.

[Audio excerpt from *Empunya*, from the album *Nunas Taksu* by Gamelan Singamurti, composed by Zachary Chan, 2018. Courtesy the artist.]

Yeah, I'm chasing pleasure, but also being able to make work pleasurable.

Joel Tan: And ethically.

Zachary Chan: And ethically, exactly. So that's the real reason for collaboration, because it's fun. And because I don't have to bear the burden of artistic production by myself.

Joel Tan: So, has this work you've been doing been pleasurable?

Zachary Chan: Yes! Because I'm also collaborating. I would like to say that I'm collaborating with one of my good friends called Nai lyn Hui. She's the one who is helping me to sew all the tapestries together. I am really her assistant because I'm just cutting and pinning things. I don't have much expertise when it comes to sewing but through new collaborations—she's my first-time collaborator—I get to experience working with many different mediums which is always very stimulating for me.

Joel Tan: And of course down the line during this residency, in the activations you're hoping to include, you'll be bringing in lots of people in as well.



Zachary Chan and Joel Tan recording AiRCAST, 20 December 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Zachary Chan: Including you! And Rose, who is one of my really good friends whom I've played gamelan with for about eight years. She's someone that I would be interested in making music with. Yep.

Joel Tan: I guess that brings us to the end of our chat Zach. Thank you so much for sharing your research. I had a great time

Zachary Chan: Thank you, Joel.

I'd like to give a disclaimer that I've only really begun researching this in really great detail at NTU CCA Singapore so the research is about four months in and so I am bound to have some kind of blind spots or make factual errors and I also would like to welcome anyone who listens to this, if they want to have a conversation with me to like please reach out and I would be happy to listen to what you have to say as well.

Nadia Amalina: 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 your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other 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 artist Zachary Chan in conversation with Joel Tan. I am Nadia Amalina, the programme manager and co-editor of this podcast. AiRCAST is conceptualised and co-edited by Dr Anna Lovecchio. The Audio Engineer is Ashwin Menon.

The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai with field recordings of our non-human neighbours in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on 20 December 2022. Thank you for listening.